

C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 003969

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/14/2009

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SUBJECT: ITALY DEFENDS ITS NEW IMMIGRATION POLICY

REF: ROME 3968

Classified By: POL M/C TOM COUNTRYMAN FOR REASONS 1.5 (b)(d)

11. (C) Summary: Faced with a political imperative to stop waves of illegal immigrants, the Italian government has stepped up cooperation with Libya and adopted a policy of quickly returning to Libya immigrants who land illegally in Sicily. Responding to UN, NGO and opposition criticism, Italian officials stress they are continuing to provide immigrants with emergency assistance and are processing asylum requests. Given the lack of a unified EU policy on immigration, Italian officials believe they have no choice but to act to protect their borders. End Summary.

12. (C) In a meeting with Laborcouns October 11, Giuseppe Moscato, Diplomatic Advisor to the Minister of Interior, laid out the government's vision for dealing with the immigration crisis. He provided official figures that reveal the scope of the problem. Between September 29 and October 7, 1,787 illegal immigrants (including 1,119 Egyptians, 11 Moroccans, 23 Bangladeshis) arrived in Lampedusa; of these 1,153 were returned to Libya on commercial and military charter flights paid for by the Italian government. Another 544 immigrants were sent to various processing centers; of these, 181 received a temporary permit to stay; 122 were awaiting a permit; 140 have indicated a desire for asylum; another 101 were awaiting processing. According to a statement by Interior Minister Pisanu, UNHCR representatives were initially denied entry to the Lampedusa facility until the government was able to establish some order; a center designed to house 186 people had been overwhelmed by 1,200 immigrants.

Bilateral Agreements

13. (C) Moscato stressed that Italy's first priority was to provide emergency food, health care and clothing to the immigrants who arrive. But he stated that Italy needs to take preemptive action beyond its borders to stop the growing tidal wave of immigrants, especially from African countries. Hence, the recent agreement with Tripoli to provide the Libyan immigration services with training and equipment to better control its borders before immigrants set sail for Italy. The training would include courses on how to identify false documents, how to screen for explosives and drugs, and how to form border patrols. Now that the EU has lifted its embargo, Italy will be able to provide equipment such as jeeps and surveillance equipment. Moscato noted that Libya had a very long shopping list, not all of which would be filled. Libya continued to be very cooperative but Rome was having difficulty dealing with Tripoli's idea of pan-Arab or pan-African unity, concepts that prevented the kind of visa controls and border security measures typical in Europe. The agreement also provides for Libya to accept Italian flights of immigrants who are being quickly returned to Libya upon arrival in Sicily.

14. (C) A similar Italian program in Albania (which include stationing Italian Coast Guard vessels in Alodian ports) significantly reduced the number of Albanian refugees reaching Italy over the last few years, according to Moscato. The majority of recent arrivals via Libya were Egyptians (many claiming to be Palestinian); to date, Moscato said that Rome's efforts to convince Egypt to control its borders have been unsuccessful. He expected that Italian officials would raise the immigration issue with President Mubarak during his visit to Rome this week. In his discussions with the Libyans, Pisanu has stressed the dangers of immigrants with terrorist connections who bring "disease and social disorder" to Libya. Moscato believes the majority of boat crossings are organized by criminal groups charging \$1,000-2,000 to deliver each immigrant to Sicilian shores. The new, well-publicized policy of quick return will, he believed, discourage other immigrants from wasting their money on a futile effort.

A "Global" Issue

15. (C) Despite bilateral efforts, Moscato emphasized that the long-term answer to the immigration problem would require

broad cooperation among EU countries and beyond, perhaps

between the EU and the Organization for African Union. Poverty rates in Africa were growing and, ultimately, stopping the refugee flow would require increased developmental aid to the poorer nations. He lamented the fact that so much EU funding is focused on cultural programs rather than development aid to combat what he considered a core security concern for Europe. Also necessary, according to Moscato, was a new system of immigration quotas for both individual EU countries and the community as a whole. A regularized system of legal immigration would, he believed, reduce pressure for illegal immigrants, discourage organized crime and regularize the flow of workers from Africa but also Asia and South America. He noted that the EU should be concerned about discouraging immigration from Africa because many new arrivals migrate from Italy to the rest of the EU. However, he was not optimistic that the EU would adopt a unified approach to immigration because of the many conflicting concerns of member states. Northern tier countries were concerned with asylum issues; countries on the eastern border were focused on refugee flows from the former Soviet Union; only the southern tier faced the problem of waves of boat people arriving from Africa.

Detention Camps/Human Rights

16. (C) Moscato was adamant that Italy was doing all it could to respect the human rights of the immigrants landing on its shores. But he did not consider immigrants who were returned to Libya as being Italy's problem. Pisanu will discuss the concept of detention camps located outside of EU borders next week in Brussels; Italy continues to support creation of these centers to take the pressure off of Italy. At the moment, Italy was waiting for Germany to resolve an internal debate about its position on the camps. Meanwhile, Pisanu in a statement stressed that Libya was a signatory to the 1969 Convention of the Organization of the African Union, which "recognizes the Geneva Convention as a fundamental and universal instrument for granting refugee status," and that the 1969 Convention provides for member states to co-operate with the UNHCR. Apparently without irony, Pisanu also noted that Libya had held the rotating Presidency of the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2002. Moscato conceded that Libyan officials were ill-prepared to deal with the human rights challenge posed by these illegal immigrants, but he reiterated the hope that the widely publicized program of returning refugees to Libya would discourage future immigrants and reduce the scope of the problem. In the meantime, Italy had to "act alone" to protect its own security and interests. MFA officials reporting on PM Berlusconi's latest visit to Libya (reftel) echoed the same sentiments.

17. (C) Separately, Laborcouns met with IOM Director for the Mediterranean, Peter Schatzer, who said that he would travel to Tripoli this week to evaluate the situation and make preliminary recommendations on how IOM could provide assistance in relocating refugees. Schatzer noted that Italy provides significant funding for IOM initiatives in the region; theoretically, this could include support for IOM activities in Libya.

18. (C) Comment: While Italian officials would welcome EU-wide solutions to the immigration challenge, they face current domestic political pressure (especially from the Lega Nord) to take firm action and have opted first for bilateral measures, beginning with Libya. Faced with UN, NGO and opposition criticism of its new policy of quick return, the government is stressing its commitment to protecting human rights and insists it is continuing to process asylum appeals.

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2004ROME03969 - Classification: CONFIDENTIAL